



# Women in business

*By Carina Scheuringer*

We like to think that we live in an enlightened age, where the roads to parity have long been paved. In Switzerland, gender equality has been anchored in the Federal Constitution for over three decades and women have been making inroads into the traditionally male-dominated world of Swiss business ever since. However, disparities still remain. According to the Federal Office of Gender Equality, women continue to earn an average of 20 per cent less than their male counterparts in equivalent roles and they remain over-represented in lower-paid jobs with lesser managerial responsibilities. There is also a disproportionately high percentage of women employed part-time (57 per cent of women, compared to 13 per cent of men).

However, Switzerland is by no means alone. On 7 March, one day before the 2012 International Women's Day, the U.S. Embassy to Switzerland brought together women leaders from Switzerland and the United States in their second bilateral conference entitled 'Sister Republics: Building Bridges' to discuss common issues and find practical solutions on the topic of gender equality. We took the opportunity to speak to both keynote speakers, Isabelle Welton and Judith A. McHale, as well as to U.S. President Obama's most recent Chief Domestic Policy Advisor, Melody Barnes.



# Judith A. McHale

*Former Under Secretary of State and former CEO of Discovery Communication*

## What came out of today's conference for you?

I found it absolutely fascinating to see that the challenges women face in Switzerland are really very similar to those we face in the United States. I am a very big believer in people getting together to identify things that we have in common and to collectively come up with creative and innovative solutions. In our discussions, there was a lot of focus on the importance of having a flexible work place to really help people in today's complicated world to deal with all the challenges that they face. Some of those topics – for example job sharing, mentoring, and sponsorship – were really very compelling. One interesting thing that came out for me was that the problems that women face are as much our own problems, as they are the problems of our employers. There is a lot that each one of us can and should be doing to improve the situation – in addition to what our surroundings (companies, governments etc) can do. Women perhaps need to take more control sometimes of our own destinies.

**During your speech you gave an example of how women can hold themselves back. When you advertised a managerial position at Discovery, only men applied. When asked why they hadn't put themselves forward, a typical response by your female workforce was: 'If you had thought I was good enough, you would have asked me.' How did you try to inspire confidence in women?**

I made this a priority at Discovery. We always encouraged women to raise their hand. I knew from my own experience how important that was. I first joined Discovery as a lawyer, but wanted a broader role. And so I went to the Chairman at the time and asked him to not just think of me as a lawyer. I told him that as Discovery was growing and expanding, I wanted to take on new responsibilities. I was there nearly 20 years in the end and ultimately ended up CEO!

The main thing is – and I always said this to both male and female employees – that you can't assume that people know who you are and what you want. You have to let people know that you are interested in something. You won't get everything you ask for, but once you have spoken up, you will be on my radar screen and I will remember that you came to me, when the next opportunity arises. I think it is very important to give people concrete examples of how someone has positively benefited from daring to stick their neck out. The other side of this is that, as a company, you have to create an environment where people feel they can take a risk; they have to feel comfortable raising their voice.

## What made you the successful businesswoman you are today?

I had three brothers and was never treated differently from them, but was always encouraged to do whatever I wanted to do. There were no perceived barriers for me within my family – and none at school or university. Sure, there were things I couldn't have done, but I never felt I was restricted in any sort of way. You can never over-emphasise the importance of the environment and the role that your family plays. When you grow up thinking that anything is possible, you look at the world differently. No doubt, it coloured my world and career that I never felt constrained. When an opportunity came my way and I wanted it, I wasn't afraid to raise my hand. Sometimes, things would go my way, other times they wouldn't – like at the law firm early on in my career, when one of the lawyers had preconceived notions as to what women could and couldn't do. But I didn't let it dishearten me and simply found other lawyers within the firm, who didn't think that way and were able to work with me. I think if you have confidence in yourself,



© Carina Scheuringer

you are going to find a way around obstacles. And sometimes, a company just isn't for you. There is nothing wrong with moving on – nothing is worse than being somewhere where you are unhappy, where a company culture does not reflect you and your career goal. It was like this for me at the law firm and so I moved on. I was always very selective about the companies I worked for and the environments I put myself. You need to identify what is important to you and then seek out places that match this as closely as possible.

## How do you achieve a work-life balance?

First of all you have to ask my kids whether I did achieve it, because they probably have different views to me on that! (laughs) It is difficult and it is challenging, but when there is no other option, you have to make it work. I didn't have another option and so I did my best. Firstly, I would always have very good conversations with my kids. I would try to be as engaged in their lives as I possibly could be. Secondly, I used to tell them when they were little that if I ever had to choose between work and them – and I was in a position to really do so – I would always choose them. At work, I always set boundaries. I would be there whenever they needed me to be there and worked as hard as I could, but I was not going to be there just to show up. I always made it very clear to people that my family was important to me and that they were a priority. I made a conscious effort to talk about my family – as I believe all leaders in organisations should do – because it sends a message throughout the organisation that it is okay to have a family. This helped my work-life balance greatly. If one of my children was competing in some sport event, I would say to everyone "I am just going to go and watch him and then I will be back." And sure, not everybody can do that, but I set a positive example for the rest of the company. I wanted people to be comfortable to do these things – as long as their work didn't suffer. It is very important that the relationship between the company and the employee is always a partnership. The company has very specific goals and objectives, it has targets it has to hit. A true partnership is an ultimate win-win and that is what we need to aspire to.

## Judith A. McHale

served as the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs under U.S. President Obama. Prior to that, she was the President and Chief Operating Officer of Discovery Communications, the parent company of the Discovery Channel. McHale is currently the President and Chief Operating Officer of the private investment company, Cane Investments LLC.





© Courtesy of IBM

## Isabelle Welton

*Vice President, Brand Systems, IBM Europe*

### **In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges for women in business today?**

I think that there are plenty of career opportunities for women. Forward-looking companies know that they need to leverage the rich pool of well-educated women. The pressure on companies to encourage diversity is growing, especially because of changing demographic trends. Skilled labour will become increasingly scarce, and a company interested in sustainable development will have to keep not only its products, but also its workforce focused on the needs of its customer base. Hiring, promoting and retaining women makes sense from a business perspective. At IBM, we feel that it is important to have a diverse employee structure, and women are one part of this. The biggest challenge for women in this context is that they can have it all. But we need to make compromises and that means we have to make decisions that are not always easy.

### **What should companies do to foster gender equality and increase the percentage of women in management?**

Companies should promote the development of women through special programmes that meet their needs. Graduate surveys

show that young women place great importance on maintaining a balance between career and family. Therefore, companies should offer family-friendly working conditions and policies; this includes everything from part-time work and flexible hours to mobile working concepts. Mobile working was introduced at IBM a long time ago and is very much appreciated by our employees. Only progressive, attractive employers will be able to recruit the best and most highly-motivated employees in the future, and by this, I mean both men and women. In order to increase the percentage of women in management at IBM, we invest in mentoring, but not just internally. Two years ago, we introduced a cross company-mentoring programme, which sees mentors and mentees come together from different companies to benefit from each other's personal and organisational perspectives, cultures and attitudes.

### **How do you create a 'culture which values diversity' at IBM?**

We are all operating within a very competitive environment and need to attract and retain talented resources. Diversity at IBM is defined to be all-inclusive, encompassing not just race, gender and physical abilities, but differences in culture, lifestyle, age, religion, economic status, sexual orientation and marital status. Through our diversity and inclusion management, we aim to create a working environment, in which each person can offer their best and develop. It is a fact that diverse teams are better equipped to deal with a diverse customer set. We derive business benefit from the creativity and innovation achieved by our diverse teams.

### **What advice would you give women who would like to have a career like yours?**

There are always many ways to achieve success in business – for men and women. You need to know what you want, and you need to step up to opportunities as they present themselves. Usually, it takes a little bit of luck too and that's fine!

#### **Isabelle Welton**

started her career at Citibank in New York and Tokyo, before returning to her native Switzerland, where she first worked at Zintzmeyer & Lux, and later at Zurich Financial Services. She joined IBM in 2003 as Manager of Communication and has just been appointed Vice President, Brand Systems, IBM Europe.



## Melody C. Barnes

*Former Domestic Policy Advisor to President Barack Obama*

### What came out of the today's conference for you?

I found it extremely beneficial – on a personal level, but also for our countries – to see relationships develop between all these amazing women, i.e. leaders in politics, business, public sector, the media etc. I also liked the focus, which was not on the problems, but on the solutions, on what the next steps should be. In my discussion group, we talked about an exchange – about bringing successful U.S. women to Switzerland (and vice versa) to explore best practices in each other's countries, so that we can learn from each other. We also talked about the need to create greater incentives for the private sector to focus more on the issues of childcare and after-school care, so that women can really fully participate in the workplace. We know that so many businesses are aware about the potential of women, but many have yet to deal with the realities of women's lives. Another fascinating conversation was the difference between mentorship and sponsorship, with the latter going much beyond simple support but actively advancing someone's career. It really hit home to me, what I can do but also how to think about my own career and those who could sponsor me.

### How big a part did role models/sponsors play in your career?

Huge... I was a senior executive at the non-profit organisation *Center for American Progress*, when the CEO was a man named John Podesta. He was President Clinton's Chief of Staff and to me, he was a true sponsor. Another person was Senator Edward M. Kennedy, my beloved former boss. Both men did not only lead by example, but they helped me to understand the intersection of public policy and strategy based on their experience and helped me advance my career. There have also been a number of women, who have inspired and supported me, but those two men stand out the most.

I was particularly inspired by their own level of excellence in their field and in their work – and also their level of generosity and desire to help a younger woman like me move through the ranks. I know of instances, when I wasn't around and they were very supportive of me. It is very important to know what is being said about you – you need to have someone in the room who has your back. And that's exactly what they looked out for me. And they also gave me very smart career advice.

### How can you pass on some of your experience and inspire confidence in younger women?

It is really important to me to inspire confidence in young women and help them move up the ranks. You have to be open and forthright; you have to be available to answer their



© Carina Scheuringer

questions and to answer them honestly, so that these young women know that they are being taken seriously. As a manager, it is also important to provide critical, but fair advice. Finally, you have to act as an example, so that young women realise that there is no magic fairy dust. Having moved up through the ranks myself, I could share my experiences, talk about situations and decisions I faced and how I dealt with them and why.

### Did you ever experience gender inequality first-hand?

I am not naive. There were probably a number of things that happened along the way that were unfair, but, overall, I feel I have been very fortunate in the experiences and in the opportunities that I have had. I have always had wonderful managers, who have been very supportive – like the sponsors I have mentioned. I have always had a great network of people, who have helped and supported me – and that always gave me confidence. This includes my bosses. When I was in the Senate, I was often the only woman and sometimes the only person of colour in a meeting, but I knew I had the support of my boss – Senator Kennedy – who believed in me. That made all the difference. I feel like I have been very lucky in my career.

### How do you achieve a work-life balance?

I have always tried to focus on what the priorities are. At the end of the day, your family and the people you love and who love you have to be your biggest priority. I have always been very passionate about my work and appreciated the great opportunities it has created, but I have always tried to keep my eye on the ball. After three amazing years in the White House – and it was such an honour to be asked by the President to serve as Domestic Policy Advisor – I realised that it was time for me to start a new phase in my life. I was fairly recently married and my parents were getting older. I really wanted more flexibility and more time to spend with the people that matter the most to me. I didn't ever want to look back and regret that I didn't give myself this time. A good friend once said to me, "You can have everything you want, but you can't always have it at the same time" – and I take that to heart.

### Melody C. Barnes

served as Assistant to U.S. President Barack Obama and as Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council until January 2012. Prior to that, she was the Executive Vice President at the Center of American Progress and worked with Senator Edward M. Kennedy on the Senate Judiciary Committee.